

Tuesday, December 9, 2008

Universality of Human Rights
(Op-ed signed by U.S. Ambassador R. Niels Marquardt)

The human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are endowed at birth to all human beings. During Human Rights Week, December 8-12, 2008, the people of the United States will join in celebrating the Universal Declaration with men and women of every culture and creed, every race and religion, in countries large and small, developed and developing.

Over the sixty years since the Declaration's adoption on December 10, 1948, there have been remarkable gains on every continent for the rights that it enumerates. Yet, six decades on, hundreds of millions of people still are denied fundamental freedoms by their governments. Today, across the globe, men and women are working to secure the basic rights to live in dignity, to follow their consciences and speak their minds without fear, to choose those who would govern them and hold their leaders accountable, and to obtain equal justice under the law. In many countries, brave individuals who peacefully press for the rights of their fellow countrymen and women are targets of persecution and imprisonment by state authorities.

In the hindsight of history, these heroes and heroines will be recognized for who they are - impatient patriots who not only inspire their fellow citizens, but whose example gives hope to people everywhere who press for the freedoms set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Democracy is the Form of Government Capable of Securing and Protecting Human Rights

We believe that democracy is the only form of government capable of securing and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms over the long term. Countries in which power is concentrated in the hands of unaccountable rulers are the world's most systematic human rights violators.

That said, no form of government is without flaws. Democracy is a system of government of, by and for the people, based on the principle that human beings have the inherent right to shape their own future. But we humans are flawed creatures and therefore there must be built-in correctives and counterweights to democratic government, such as a robust civil society, a vibrant free media, a legislature and judiciary independent of the executive power, and a well established rule of law.

US Record

The United States, like all democracies, is not perfect. Our citizens claim a proud history of striving in every generation since our nation's founding to bring our democratic practices closer

to our cherished principles, even as we seek to confront the injustices and challenges of each new age.

We take all of our human rights commitments seriously, and, in our good faith efforts to meet those commitments, we value the vital role played by civil society and independent media. We do not consider views about our performance voiced by others in the international community to be interference in our internal affairs, nor should other governments regard expressions about their performance as such.

Building vibrant democracies worldwide is the work of generations, but it is urgent work that cannot be delayed. In January, our democracy will mark an historic event – the inauguration of the first African American as President of the United States. Yet, we fully recognize that our national journey toward a more perfect union is far from complete.

Democracy's path is neither smooth nor straight, but it is sure. Along the way, there are bound to be stumbles and setbacks. Some states still have weak institutions of democratic government and continue to struggle; others have yet to fully commit to the democratic process. The way forward is clear, however: entrust citizens with greater freedom so that they can use it to correct the deficiencies that stand in the way of a hopeful future.

The Essential Contributions of Human Rights Defenders,
NGOs and Independent Media

In today's world, the problems confronting states are too complex even for the most powerful to tackle alone. The contributions of civil society and the free flow of ideas and information are crucial in addressing a host of domestic and international challenges. Restricting the political space of NGOs and public debate only limits a society's own growth. Without civil society and the independent media, and the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, democracy is deprived of its life's breath.

When democracies support the work of human rights advocates and civil society organizations, we help men and women in countries across the globe shape their own destinies in freedom. And by so doing, we help to build a safer, better world for all.

We must defend the defenders, for they are the agents of peaceful, democratic change.